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ABSTRACT

To research the implications of portfolio assessment for student learning and teacher methodology, a teacher examined the interplay of reflection and evaluation in her expository writing class of 12. In a semester-long intermediate-level class, students wrote a draft of a paper each week, with each paper then going through multiple drafts. Students were also asked to write reflective notes on the backs of their drafts describing how they thought the draft had turned out, sharing ideas they had for the next draft, and asking for specific feedback from the instructor. Although many students were hesitant and unsure of what to say at first, once begun, the note-writing activity became a valued part of the kind of dialogue that can make a class a community of writers. The samples of reflective writing from students included evaluative language; therefore, students were encouraged to collaborate to develop evaluative criteria. As a result, they began to build their vocabulary about writing and the criteria to evaluate it. (Sample criteria lists are appended.) (NH)

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Going Beyond Assessment:

Turning Portfolios into Tools for Student Reflection

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Going Beyond Assessment:
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"Dear Ruth: Help! Help! Help! I've written a piece of crap. I haven't expressed my thoughts properly and I think the first section is way too long in comparison to the rest." That's the beginning of Adam's note to me after he completed the first draft of his proposal. He and his classmates in English 50, Expository Writing, write such reflective notes for every draft. While not all of these notes are so crudely judgmental, most are evaluative. It is the interplay of such reflection and evaluation that I am examining in this class of twelve. More specifically, I am researching what happens when students are given frequent opportunities to reflect on their writing and when they are in control of the criteria by which their writing will be evaluated. Before I talk more about the reflective activities I'm using and the process used for developing criteria for evaluation, I'll give you a little background on this research project and on this particular class.

My interest has been in the implications of portfolio assessment for student learning and teacher methodology. Separating grades from evaluation makes it possible to shift the responsibility for evaluation from the teacher to the students. Evaluation can then become what Catharine Lucas, in Kathleen Yancey's book on portfolios, has labeled "reflective evaluation." That is, feedback that learners give themselves. Most students have few opportunities when such internal feedback is either encouraged or valued. Likewise they have few opportunities to reflect on their writing and to practice evaluating writing. My observation is that most college writers have an internal set of criteria that they use to judge their own work. I want to use reflective writing to help them bring their criteria to the surface, then have them work together with other writers to develop criteria for specific

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assignments--with the idea that the more sophisticated list they internalize will enable them to become more independent writers. Doing this means changing my role in the classroom from one who does the reflecting for them and who provides the criteria for evaluation to one who creates opportunities for them to reflect and to experiment with evaluative criteria.

In this semester-long, intermediate-level writing class, students write a draft a week toward completion of five assignments. Each paper goes through multiple drafts and students receive feedback from their peers, their instructor and, when appropriate, from an expert reader. Notes like Adam's are among the most useful reflective tools I have found, a tool especially well suited to multiple-draft writing. Those of you familiar with Dewey's ideas on experience, reflection and learning as highlighted by Peter Elbow yesterday will recognize this kind of reflective writing. I began using these notes at the suggestion of Sue Dinitz, another writing instructor at the University of Vermont. The idea is simple: Students write on the back of their drafts describing how they think the draft turned out, like Adam's "I've written a piece of crap"; they share ideas they have for the next draft, such as Sarah's "I still think I'll find out what other buildings use to cover windows. I need to revise the format a bit and add a conclusion"; and they ask for specific feedback they'd like from me, as Heidi writes "I am also concerned about the length of the paper because I feel I have stated my argument and solutions to briefly." When first asked to write such a note, some students are hesitant and unsure of what to say. They are not reflecting just for themselves--their teacher will also be their audience and many have never written in an informal way to a professor. Most have little experience writing multiple drafts; few think of themselves as writers.

Once begun, this note-writing activity becomes a valued part of the dialogue that can make a class a community of writers. Some students arrive with notes already written on their drafts; most quickly grow to appreciate the informal nature of the notes and might share a reaction all can appreciate, like Sara's "Overall I'm happy I got through it." The notes may be addressed to me, the teacher, or to other students who give feedback in peer

response groups. Sarah told me of how much she likes what she calls, "the large amount of communication between teacher and student through 'Dear Ruth' notes." She claimed these notes provided the impetus for her to do a lab report early for her biology class so she could get that teacher's suggestions for improvement. As she said, "I guess this class rubbed off."

In addition to giving students a chance to reflect on what they have just written, these notes also make responding to drafts more meaningful and much easier. Instead of searching for words to tactfully but clearly address the problems of the draft, I find that students usually know the problems in their drafts. Their internal evaluator tells them it's too brief, not clearly organized, lacking a conclusion or whatever. I need only agree. Then I can spend most of my time helping them progress by making suggestions for solving those problems.

The other reflective writing built into this class is periodic self evaluations. Students recently completed a mid-semester evaluation that focused on progress so far, for example Peter writes, "My progress this semester has been fair. I really liked how my proposal came out. . . . To this point I don't know if I have developed as a writer,. . . I also haven't written my best work yet." It also included their thoughts on the goals they are working on like Morgan: "This course has given me the opportunity to really take a good look at my style of writing. I feel that I have put a genuine effort into making my papers better through thoughtful revision." At the end of the semester they prepare a portfolio that contains the final and all preliminary drafts of the class assignments. They are encouraged to continue revising those papers until the portfolio is due. In organizing their portfolio, I ask them to order their papers according to quality, putting the best one on top. They write two reflective pieces at this time: another self evaluation and an introduction to their portfolio. By this time they will have experience doing reflective writing and will have been involved in establishing the criteria used to evaluate each piece of writing and the portfolio.

From the samples of reflective writing that I have shown, you undoubtedly see that these students' reflection includes evaluative language. My prompts for both the "Dear Ruth" notes and the mid-term evaluations call for it. This merging of reflection and evaluation is intended to enhance student self-awareness and to bring out the evaluative criteria they have internalized. We then work to develop that criteria to make it more meaningful and useful for them in future writing.

A look at their first efforts working together to define and describe criteria shows how this process has effected the students, the classroom atmosphere and my teaching. That work in developing criteria began with the proposal in the third week of class. The proposal assignment reads:

> For this assignment, I want you to have the experience of writing a proposal, but I realize you may not yet have the background knowledge to write within your field. Because proposals are written to specific people in order to accomplish tangible goals, it will be easier for you to make writing decisions if you choose a "real life" situation. If you have any work experience within your field, think of proposals you might want to make to improve that organization. If you haven't, consider proposing a solution to a problem within an organization you've worked for or an institution you've had personal experience with (high school, UVM, city government, court system, church).

So far they had written an audience analysis, read sample proposals and written a first draft which we discussed in conferences. The subjects of their proposals range from getting more tennis courts on campus to solving Vermont's moose problem. I initiate their search for criteria with a five-minute freewrite so they can generate ideas individually to contribute to the discussion. I wanted them to develop the first set of criteria collaboratively in order get a dialogue going about what makes good writing. My job was to observe and stay out of the discussion. A student took notes and made a transparency of their list. Here is the list of criteria that emerged after thirty minutes of discussion:

1. solutions clearly stated and backed up
2. professional
3. sense of urgency
4. helpful attitude
5. personal and other people's feelings

I was both surprised and dismayed by these results. The emotions I felt after this first foray into criteria suggest one effect of this project on my teaching. That is, I questioned my belief in their ability to do this. As discussions often do, theirs had bounced from one idea to the next. At times they spoke of similar ideas but using different words and were not able to see the relationship between their ideas. They also floundered with describing criteria that could accurately be labeled as, for example, organization or use of authority. Did they not have the necessary vocabulary? Or were they settling for generalities in order to gain agreement? Should I intervene? Should I adjust my plan for the class? Give it up?

After class ended, I read the free writes they had written before their discussion. In Holly's I see clear concern for a statement of the problem and for editing:

> I believe first the proposal should be very clear. It is important that the audience know what you want. The proposal should examine different views to the problem. . . . The paper should be well written in format and grammar. No one wants to read a sloppy paper.

Her awareness of the importance of audience is echoed by Greg:

> the conclusion must be acceptable to the reader in that it should make him/her feel as if there really is a problem and, more importantly, that the proposed solution is the best way of dealing with the problem.

The internal criteria of individual students seemed more clearly articulated, more useful than what the group came up with. Where were these clear, specific ideas when they were discussing? Certainly some more reserved students were silenced by the group or by the few more vocal students. The role that gender played in that is unclear--the class is evenly

split and both male and female students were leaders in the discussion. What might have had a greater impact is that over half of the students are business majors and the rest of the class is made up of only one student from each of several other majors. Being committed to this project and eternally optimistic, I was sure that with more time to discuss, those clear ideas would emerge.

A week later, after writing a second draft and getting feedback on it from peer response groups, I return them to their list of criteria. Again they discuss for thirty minutes. Questions emerge about just what is meant by some items on the list. In each case, someone ventures an explanation, others agree and they decide they don't need to write any descriptions on the list since they now know what they mean. They eventually make some revisions to their list:

1. solutions clearly summarized and backed up depending upon the needs of the reader
2. professional presentation
3. sense of importance
4. helpful attitude--providing solution to rectify problem
5. personal and other people's feelings

More dismay? Is it beginning to look like one student was right when, at the end of this second discussion, he commented that "we don't know"? If that were true then how did these students/learners go about finding out? Was I relinquishing power to students not willing or able to take it? Certainly it was early in the semester. Still, did this show something about the way they learn? Perhaps they were just going along with it for now. But would they ever buy into seeing themselves as evaluators of writing? Were they still trying to figure out what I want? What my set of criteria is? I also wondered if this suggested something about the kind of writers they are--here they were given a chance to revise and because they are unskilled or lazy they opted to tinker with what they had rather than throw it out and start fresh.

Another week later, they have written their third draft, the last one we will work on in class. I decide to push the criteria further by having them use it to evaluate the work of others. I arrive in class with photocopies of their list, and I divide the class into three groups. Each group is a review board with the power to accept and fund, to reject or to return for revision the proposals of their classmates. First they work individually reading the proposals, using their list of criteria to evaluate them, and writing a sentence about each item on the list for each proposal. A quick glance at a couple of them shows how they coped with the criteria--mostly they seemed to think they worked. Like most students, Jeff found number two "professional presentation" useful, useful enough to declare that Peter's is an excellent paper in that respect. (See Appendix A for Jeff's criteria comments.) The one item that several students didn't respond to was the last one "Personal and other people's feeling." It may be they left it blank for the same reason Holly wrote "I do not think this is a clear category." (See Appendix B for Holly's criteria comments.) After reading and responding individually, the groups met together to confer and decided the fate of the proposals. All were either funded or returned for revision Once they finish the proposals, they have yet another opportunity to revise the list of criteria.

My hope was that once they had worked with the list of criteria they would see it as vague or incomplete and do some major revision. Have you already guessed how wrong I was? What they did was change some wording and add a little description to what they had. Did they truly not know how to evaluate writing? Many had never written proposals before--was that making this too difficult? Or were they just playing along but still not buying in?

None of these thoughts helped much when I used their list of criteria to evaluate their third drafts. My confrontation with that list and those drafts marks the low point of the semester for me. I saw the criteria as vague, too general, missing important elements. How could I in good conscience respond only to what they seemed to be asking for? I procrastinated and complained and eventually had to face it. Yes, I needed to use their list

of criteria seriously and honestly and trust that, if they didn't get the feedback they expected, they would either ask for it in another form or find ways to get better at developing criteria.

As I explained to them when I returned the drafts, I responded as if I were the person to whom the proposal was addressed. I told them I wasn't sure what some of their criteria meant so they should ask me about any of my responses that didn't make sense to them. I also said that I hadn't made any editing suggestions like I might normally do on this nearly final draft since their criteria didn't call for it. Yes, I could have interpreted "professional presentation" to include editing, but I decided not to as a way to get them to think about making their criteria more specific. I invited them to ask me for that editing feedback if they wanted it. None of them has.

My estimation of how this is progressing changes as the semester continues. We continue to write reflectively and to experiment with criteria. At the end of the semester, students will use their lists of criteria to help them revise papers for their final portfolios. The last evaluation that they do will be of those portfolios. And, of course, they will generate the criteria for doing that, too.

Thus far I have raised more questions than I have answered. The conclusions I can draw at this time are few and tentative. Already students' awareness of criteria for evaluating writing has increased. With that awareness, they have also begun to build their vocabulary about writing and the criteria to evaluate it. I look for the criteria to increasingly direct their group work and their revision. Ultimately I see reflection and evaluation merging as criteria are addressed in their Dear Ruth notes and self evaluations. Mid-term comments suggest final results may be mixed: only one student mentioned the criteria specifically although that was in a positive way. Another student may have been referring to the criteria indirectly when he said he thought I should be the judge of the quality of his writing. Several students remarked positively about "Dear Ruth" notes.

When the semester ends, I will sort this out. For now, the wealth of data I have reminds me of what Peter Elbow, Pat Belanoff, Marcia Dickson and Kathleen Yancey all say about portfolio assessment in general--that is, it's messy. I trust that my continued work with this research project will clarify my questions in the same way that our collective research into portfolios will continue to clarify their valuable place in the assessment of writing.

Appendix A summarized for Peter

① Solutions clearly ~~stated~~ and backed up depending upon the needs of the reader

Seemed somewhat short of what is needed - There has got to be more to this project than cutting teams & financial incentives.

② Professional - presentation

Very profession in tone and style - in this respect, it is an excellent paper.

③ Sense of ~~originality~~ IMPORTANCE

Nice job here also, The addressing of school pride is excellent.

④ Helpful attitude

PROVIDING Solution to Rectify PROBLEM.

The paper is helpful but the ultimate goal is hazy. Is the overall structuring important or just Cathy's raise?

⑤ Personal and other people's feeling

This was handled well because you are dealing with a university community & the students are what matters.

IT VOLUNTEER .000

Writer: Peter Reader: by Cathy Talbert

Board's Recommendation: (circle one)

Fund | Don't Fund | Return for Revision

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Appendix B

summarized

① Solutions clearly ~~stated~~ and backed up depending upon the needs of the reader

Yes, but it is not a good suggestion to have the senior class pay for the courts. many people will be unwilling, ~~esp~~ especially if they don't play tennis

② Professional - presentation

I thought it was very professional. His format was clear and the paper ran very smoothly.

③ Sense of ~~[illegible]~~ IMPORTANCE

④ Helpful attitude
providing solution to rectify PROBLEM.

Yes, he gave many solutions. ~~His format~~

⑤ Personal and other people's feeling

↳ I do not think this is a clear category.

my personal reaction: I thought he did a very good job at meeting all the requirements we ~~set~~ discussed.

INVOLUTION .000

Writer: Jeffrey Willis Reader: Holly Holbrook

Board's Recommendation: (circle one)

(Fund) Don't Fund Return for Revision

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